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Facing Evil: Qui tacet consentit. - Who keeps silent, consents

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El Rio Debajo del Rio

The trajectory of evil is not particularly creative; it is most often banal and predictable. Evil respects no economic, social or intellectual differences. It can colonize and live well in one who has little or nothing, as well as those who have everything. Being in one profession or another, even in the consecrated ones, is no inoculation against evil. One of the strongest markers that evil is present occurs when the suffering of humanity is completely ignored.... and it was and is within one's power to make it cease... but the one in charge chooses otherwise.

--cpe

The old believers of my family said it was easy to spot a person who had no soul. The center of such persons' bodies, they said, were without light.

But far more dangerous to the souls of all, they said, were those who were filled with a certain kind of light; the light of ambition; the light of coveting, the light of wanting to control all things.

My grandmother, with her little white moustache, and habitually wearing my grandfather's old black splayed shoes with cut-outs for bunions, used to say the bible would have to be twice as long a book had the Christ walked the earth today. For there is just so much more evil that shows above ground than it used to.

For instance, she'd say, "That part about the devil taking Jesus to the top of the mountain? That part where the devil said, "All these kingdoms will be yours if only you fall down and worship me...?"

According to her crabby old woman wisdom, Jesus would have not only said, "Devil! Get thee behind me!" Jesus would have also kicked the Devil's rear end "from here to Ohio and back."

Jesus would have said, "This world? You're offering me this confused, upset and death-dealing world? Look at the shape it's in? You want to offer me wars and wickedness and mayhem in exchange for my one pure soul? You have got to be kidding! Are you crazy, Devil?! You must be out of your mind. Get the heck out of here."

We may have many modern examples however, of the devil showing up, and his dishonorable offer being snatched up happily.... Than Shwe, dictator of Burma, is one case to consider.

This week, unlike that young Messiah with such uncanny sense, the dictator of Burma in the here and now, Senior General Than Shwe, reminded us that the devil's offer of a ruined world in trade for the beatific soul isn't the ultimate deal breaker. To Than Shwe, a kingdom in return for the eternal soul, is just the right egregious trade-off.

Than Shwe is a general who carries the light of unbounded ambition. He is currently squatted over an ancient kingdom, but rather than acting like a wise ruler, acts more like Gilgamesh, the cruel king of ancient Babylonia who had so little regard for human life, that he bricked his own people into a wall he was building around his entire kingdom.

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Than Shwe is building a wall alright, against all decency, it seems. What can be the explanations of a hole in a dictator's chest where presumably he once had a heart? Evil, it seems to me, erupts when a person is purposely cruel and unrelentingly by omission or commission.

The person taken by evil acts egregiously and outrageously. From my work with survivors of man-made disasters I would say when the human mind cannot comprehend the hubris, the magnitude and destructiveness that another human being enacts, that is the marker of being face-to-face with evil. To reasoned people, almost everything is understandable: but evil is forever incomprehensible.

A case in point

For, as soon as Than Shwe made his *vajra*** deal with whatever demon he bowed to, he wasted no time. He deposed a dictator who had viciously overturned an elected democratic government, to install his own dictatorship. He played a cat and mouse game of capture, release and capture with the flower-in-the-hair-wearing gentle soul the Burmese people honestly elected Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize awardee. Power to the people? It seemed Than Shwe said a loud, *vajra* no!

Instead he slapped together phony councils with knife pressed cotton uniforms, absurdist testers of whether the people were "properly faithful" to the dictator. He built a bigger military junta, supplying it with weaponry bought in part, some say, with his cache from ongoing misdeeds in the opium trade.

Provisioned with oiled guns and plenty of ammunition, he forcibly enlisted into his army, young Buddhist men from poor villages. He kept the Burmese people so poorly fed and supplied, that many of the young

conscripted men served his army in order to have food and favor for themselves and their families.

Than Shwe offered his people a better life only if they agreed to acquiesce to -- not Than Shwe exactly -- but to whatever demon-like force had eaten him up beginning long ago.

There is far more to his exploits including Than Shwe's massacre of holy people; monks and nuns and laypeople. Last August, Than Shwe ordered the cost of fuel, including cooking gas, to be doubled overnight. This was a tremendous hardship for the poor, which comprise 85 percent of the country. In sympathy, Buddhist monks and nuns marched in the streets. They turned their alms bowls upside down in front of the military.

Turning alms bowls upside down signifies that the soldiers and sympathizers who follow and support Than Shwe would no longer be allowed the sacred honor of helping to support the lives of monks and nuns. This represents a huge loss of face for Than Shwe and his soldiers.

Alms bowls upside down signified the holy people revolting against the immorality of the government and those who support it. The principles of Buddhism, to do no harm to living creatures, foremost among them, had been utterly desecrated. The monks and nuns were saying that Than Shwe had raised up an institutionalized form of violence toward the people that could not be allowed to pass in silence.

So Than Shwe ordered Buddhist soldiers to harm the holy people; to gun-butt and beat Buddhist monks and nuns to death, to drown them in rivers, and to take them to the north country and shoot them dead. Than Shwe raided the monasteries and beat the monks and the children who studied with the monks, injuring and killing many.

Than Shwe ordered the lay people silenced and arrested. He detained mothers and fathers with small children, the elderly and the widowed. He posted pictures on posters across Burma of the arrested, bruised and bleeding as a warning to other Burmese that to be in communion with their holy people would bring beatings and worse down on their heads.

Than Shwe ordered the confiscation of all cell phones and laptops and computers so no reportage could come out of Burma.

It seemed clear that a demon, something diabolical, rather than something compassionate and human was in charge of Burma.

Than Shwe's old and venal dispassion for his people was further demonstrated this week when the central Irrawaddy River delta in Burma was destroyed by a cyclone. Death and destruction outstripped the tsunami that struck from Sri Lanka to Indonesia in 2004.

Worst case estimates in Burma put the death toll at 100,000. (Reuters reported that 230,000 died in the 2004 tsunami, half of those in Indonesia.) The U.N. estimates that 1.5 million will die in Burma if aid, expertise and time tested distribution planners and executors are not brought in immediately.

?Immediately? is long past. We are now on the ninth day since the disaster, with less than 20 percent of the affected population of injured, dying, newborns, elderly, hurt people being given even clean drinking water, let alone food, or clothing for their naked bodies.

The BBC reports that naked men dressed in only the scraps of monk's robes and naked women wearing plastic bags knotted together are trying to walk from the villages.

There is no countrywide plan to build emergency latrines to control outbreaks of cholera and typhoid. There are no national plans, nor manpower organized enough, to bury or burn the dead with proper respect, even though mass graves will be most likely.

For decimated villagers near port Thilawa, the government is handing out food -- rotting rice (more than 40 percent of the stores of rice were soaked by the rains). Meanwhile, as of two days ago, the government continued to export tons of good rice to Sri Lanka and surrounds, because the price of rice is so high on the world market. Than Shwe has his priorities. (See the Los Angeles Times, May 10: Myanmar exports rice as cyclone victims struggle.)

And in the meantime, Than Shwe is quite safe, for he and his crew were over 200 miles away when the cyclone hit.

Since the cyclone hit and killed thousands, orphaned an estimated 5,000 children, Than Shwe has remained bunkered and invisible to his people, to the public international community.

Than Shwe has failed to respond with acuity and timeliness to the U.N. requests to land huge international relief supplies of food, water, medical equipment, medicine and aid organizers and workers to help the Burmese people.

Than Shwe has allowed only a few plane loads of supplies to land, but no aid workers, other than those already in the country, such as Doctors Without Borders which, has a 40 person mission to help the outbreaks of AIDS and malaria in Burma, according to an article in *The New York Times* last week.

Than Shwe has ordered other planes away, and not allowed them to land nor to discharge their cargo for the people.

Those few supplies taken in, Than Shwe has wasted precious time, insisting that these be stamped with his name, so that as they are given to whomever they are given, they will think they are from Than Shwe instead of souls across the world who groan with and for the suffering Burmese.

Than Shwe has delayed the processing of visas for aid workers, with some in his administration hinting that aid workers might be terrorists.

Than Shwe had his minions claim that he cannot receive phone calls because "the lines are down."

But, apparently Than Shwe and his junta were well enough, fed enough, watered and sheltered enough to press ahead with a nation-wide "referendum" on May 10, six days after the cyclone, and with no help to the suffering Burmese in the interior in sight. The "referendum" is designed to give power to the military government in perpetuity.

Despite Burmese and world petitions to postpone the referendum since because of the disaster, hundreds of thousands of people cannot vote, Than Shwe went ahead anyway.

NPR reports in one secretive interview that the people of a village not affected by the cyclone, told the interviewer that they voted in agreement with Than Shwe because they are afraid. The clerks at the polling places are soldiers. And there is no such thing, therefore, as secret ballots. (See The Associated Press, Deadly cyclone overshadows Myanmar's vote on constitution.

Than Shwe's plan, apparently, is to claim to the world that he has "taken the next step for democracy" as he said when he first unveiled the referendum. He wants to say that he has held open elections.

In 1938, Dr. Carl Gustav Jung, a psychiatrist, wrote a paper on Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, dictators all. In the paper, Jung said that the deformed psyche of a dictator allows no passage or pass-through except by his say-so alone, that any benevolence meted out to others is measured against the unquestioning loyalty of each subject toward the despot. Despot knows best. And, despot always comes first, middle and last, all at once.

But, then Jung went on to say a rather startling thing: A dictator with grandiose fantasies of domination, desires at base, to act something like a shaman toward the people. A mystical, unfrontable, do-as-I-say, omniscient shaman, who carries a luminosity that people fear, an uncanny presence that makes people afraid to be non-conforming, for the shaman threatens death to them in one way or another. Death by shunning. Death by exclusion. Death by exile. Death by murder. Death by being used as just a brick in the wall of the shaman-dictator's ego, ambition and self-lustre.

The old believers of my family would suggest that a demon had eaten Than Shwe, and now ensconced, acts through Than Shwe, using his mind and voice at will. That the real Than Shwe has been masticated, and lies somewhere in the stomach of the demon. That the demon originally gained entry through a wound. That the demon promised that if the person would give up his soul, the demon would make certain he was never harmed in any way ever again.

Whatever in the world could stop, or better, transform, such a cruel dictator? Is there any hope? The old people would say, Yes, there might be hope. But the cruel one would have to place God -- rather than himself and the demon's plans for all things -- at the center.

That the return to God in the midst of all error, return to merciful God, return to compassionate God, return to life-granting God, return to Wise Consort God, return to God of all Soul, return to this good God as the center of all things, speaking from there, acting from there daily, hourly, minutely, would cause the shattering of the demon --

Then, the real soul, entrapped and held prisoner far back in an unlit room in the belly of the beast, could be gently led back into the light of day, married again to, rather than exiled from, mind, body and heart.

Returning to the real center; that's what the Master said to the devil who offered him all the kingdoms of earth if only the Master would fall down and worship him. The Christ said it pretty clearly: No, you withered thing. No worshipping flecks of evil. Only The One. No other.

No demon can withstand such constant return to center, to goodness, to a considered consciousness and particularly to being called out and named with such clarity. Evil must shatter eventually. We've seen it personally, but also in the colonizations of India, Poland, the dictatorship of Romania, the U.S., many places in the past, and ongoing now.

In Matthew's story 4:1-11, about the devil taking Jesus to the highest mountain peak, saying all this will be his if he will only bow down to the devil, Jesus strongly refutes the devil Then we're shown one outcome of raising one's voice to evil clearly, vociferously, with certainty and repeatedly:

Then the devil left ... and behold, angels came and ministered.

The old people say, too, call a spade a spade and run to the center in order to destabilize evil. The biblical story shows not only Yeshua raising his voice against the devil, but also a recapitulation of previous strong statements found in Deuteronomy. Yeshua standing, in a sense, on the voice of the ancients poured into modern times, drawing strength to speak from the ground notes of long ago.

It is clear, though not all ideals can be reached overnight, that many fall into the maw before we can force the issues. We are not working toward perfection, but toward progression. Though raising our voices might endanger us, it also calls others forward too, emboldened others, calls others to look and see, calls others not to stand down but to join.

I wrote in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* about finding one's own pack, quoting the poet Charles Simic: "He who cannot howl, will not find his pack." The same is true, I think, when evil is on foot overland, and it's time for calling the angels.

***Vajra*, from the Sanskrit, used in Buddhism to describe a place or state very much like the Christian idea of Hell.

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